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SUBJECT: FINLAND EU PRESIDENCY VIEWS ON NEXT STEPS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Classified By: POLCHIEF GREGORY THOME FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The EU has agreed to offer peacekeepers for a mission in Lebanon if called upon by the UN. Privately, Finnish MFA Secretary of State Torstila told us that UN and EU hopes to send a force to the region any time soon are "unrealistic," given the current level of violence and apparent opposition to such a force from both Tel Aviv and Beirut. Should such a mission ultimately go forward, Torstila believes that at least 20,000 troops -- with a clear "peace enforcement" mandate -- will be necessary, as opposed to the 10,000 the EU Ministers apparently discussed informally. He was pointedly non-committal in response to a question regarding how EU troops might be involved in enforcing UNSC Resolution 1559. Should an EU PKO eventually go forward, Finland intends to show leadership by seeking a supplemental budget allocation that would allow it to make a robust national contribution. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Over a tour-d'horizon lunch with Ambassador Ware and PolChief, Finnish Secretary of State Pertti Torstila offered several insights into the EU Foreign Ministers' announcement this week of its willingness to send international peace monitoring forces to Lebanon in response to a United Nations request. While emphasizing that the EU stands ready to do so if called upon, Torstila stated bluntly that "Kofi Annan's dream" -- which is shared by the EU -- of sending such a force anytime soon is "unrealistic." The current level of violence on the ground simply will not permit it and, it appears, neither Tel Aviv nor Beirut is prepared to accept such a force. For now, Torstila said, the EU will have to stand by and wait to see how events in the region develop.

¶3. (C) As regards the force itself, Torstila said that the EU Ministers had informally talked about a mission numbering about 10,000 troops. However, in his view, this would be far too few; at least 20,000 would be necessary. In addition, even though the EU and the UN have used terms such as "stabilization force" or "peace monitoring mission", any force that might eventually be sent to Lebanon would have to be empowered with a clear "peace enforcement" mandate. When asked, he was careful not to specify at this stage what role -- if any -- EU troops might play in helping to enforce UNSC Resolution 1559 by disarming Hezbollah. However, he agreed with the U.S. that implementation of 1559 is ultimately one of the keys to peace, and said the EU role vis--vis the resolution would certainly have to be defined by the Security Council and agreed to by the EU if the mission were to proceed.

14. (C) As regards Finland's national role, Torstila referred to the GOF's public announcement that it would provide a robust contribution to any EU peace operation in the Middle East, to show leadership during its EU Presidency (among other reasons). He noted that Finland's legislative ceiling for crisis management operations (CMOs) abroad is 2000 troops under arms at any given time, and that currently it is well under that number. (NOTE: Finland currently has 780 troops involved in CMOs worldwide; its largest current operations are in Bosnia and in Afghanistan.) He acknowledged that the GOF's CMO budget is currently fully committed, but expressed confidence that Parliament would approve a supplementary budget for a Middle East operation.

15. (C) COMMENT: Clearly the Finnish EU Presidency understands that several factors need to fall into place or be negotiated before the EU can realistically consider responding to a UN call for peacekeepers in the Middle East -- not the least of which would be a dramatic change in the current situation. The Finns, who have experience and a strong track record in CMO, are also acutely aware that such a mission would be dangerous, politically difficult, and carry no guarantees of success. That said, they are ready to move forward nationally and in their current EU leadership role if and when such a mission becomes a possibility. END COMMENT.

WARE